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ABSTRACT

Six research avenues were used to study transfer students for recruitment and enrollment management purposes: (1) current application, enrollment and program data of transfer students were examined; (2) internal persistence rates of transfer student cohorts were tracked for 6 years; (3) persistence rates of transfer students after 1 year were compared to persistence rates of transfer students in other colleges; (4) transfer student demographic data were analyzed; (5) transfer student satisfaction indices were examined; and (6) the market share of eight regional colleges for two-year college graduates was compared. Results included the following: both persistence and graduation rates of full-time transfer students within the college were more than double the persistence rates of first-time, entering students; distinct differences were noted between transfer students and other students in both demographics and satisfaction; transfer students were more likely to stop-out than drop-out; and their reasons for leaving were more likely to be financial or job-related than dissatisfaction with the institution. Contains 10 references. (Author/KM)

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A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSFER STUDENTS TO AND FROM A PUBLIC, LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

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for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

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ABSTRACT

Six different research avenues were employed to study transfer students for recruitment and enrollment management purposes:

1) current application, enrollment, and program data of transfer students were examined,
2) internal persistence rates of transfer student cohorts were tracked for six years,
3) persistence rates of transfer students after one year were compared with persistence rates of transfer students in other colleges,
4) transfer student demographic data were analyzed,
5) transfer student satisfaction indices were examined, and
6) the market share of eight regional colleges for two-year college graduates was compared.

The audience for this study was senior administrators, admissions personnel, the admissions committee, and the enrollment management team.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSFER STUDENTS TO AND FROM A PUBLIC, LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, students who transfer to Suburban College have comprised a substantial proportion (almost two-thirds) of the entering student body each fall. However, they are even more important to the College than this proportion indicates because their retention and graduation rates have been significantly higher than those of first-time, entering students.

Recently, a survey presented data which indicated that 6% of the students entered Suburban College for the purpose of taking courses necessary for transfering to another college and 16% expected to transfer before they graduated. Although these percents compared favorably with national norms, they raised questions about who these students were and what could be done to keep them at the college.

With the declining pool of high school graduates, it has become even more important to retain those students who are currently attending. Transfer students, with their proven academic competence, have demonstrated the capability of high retention rates if their needs are met. For these reasons, it was important that Suburban College study its transfer students in-depth to be able to cultivate and retain such valuable enrollments.

PURPOSE

Transfer students had never before been studied as an entity at Suburban College. As the literature has attested, data concer-

ning transfer students is often difficult to obtain for a variety of reasons ranging from inconsistent definitions, students transferring out of state, and reluctance of other institutions to provide reliable data. Especially difficult to obtain is information about students who transfer out from a college.

Since transfer students have been such a large and vital proportion of the student population at Suburban College, it was imperative to know for recruitment purposes from which institutions students had transferred and whether the College was obtaining its share of the transfer market. For enrollment management purposes, it was important to ascertain whether substantial numbers of students were indeed transferring away from Suburban and, if so, why, and how they differed from other students. In the past, information on where students go when they leave the College had always been very difficult to obtain.

Information was also sought concerning how student persistence rates at Suburban College compared with those of students at other colleges and how satisfied students were at the college. For the purposes of this study, transfer students were defined as all students who were not first-time-to-college. Since such different subgroups comprised the transfer students, they were often divided into those who had only enough credits to enter Suburban College as lower-division students and those who had enough credits to enter as upper-division students.

LITERATURE

Several researchers have described retention and graduation rates that were lower for transfer students than for other stu-

dents. In 1977, Astin reported that transfer students were 10% to 15% less likely to complete their college degrees than were institutional persisters with similar attributes. Anderson & Campbell (1981) found that the percent of continuing sophomores and juniors, who graduated or remained enrolled after eight terms at the University of Illinois at Chicago, was twice as high (78%) as the percent of community college transfer students (42%) and four-year college transfer students who did so.

Astin (1977) reported regional differences in transfer success rates pertinent to the location of Suburban College. He found that transfering from public institutions in northeastern states increased a student's chances of dropping-out by 15%. Not surprisingly, he found that students, who entered four-year colleges with plans to transfer, were negatively associated with persistence.

Noel, Levitz, Saluri, and Associates (1987) advised that the students most at risk for dropping out (low-income students, academically underprepared students, students with uncertain academic goals, returning learners, and students who commute) should be targeted through key programs and activities. Richardson and Bender (1986) urged understanding of transfer students who change not only from one academic level to another but also from a distinctively different institutional culture to one which they usually describe as less nurturing. Astin (1977) said that campuses "...should be alerted to the special problems of the transfer students and ...support should be enlisted to help integrate these students into the campus culture."

Some researchers stress the importance of external measures

to ease the transition for transfer students. Cohen and Brawer (1988) found that state policies and interinstitutional agreements regarding curriculum, academic support services, and financial aid have an impact on transfer rates. Ughetto and Hoerner (1987) stressed the importance of upper-level leadership and commitment, faculty involvement and open and formal communication for articulation. They also stated that articulation agreements must exist which specify the transferability of course credits to four-year institutions and which focus on smoothing students' passage from one educational level to the next.

The Ford Foundation Report (1988) also found that students enjoyed greater ease of movement between institutions where Universities and community colleges operated under common course numbering systems and where expectations were clear and consistent for courses fulfilled. Vague or incomplete information, inconsistent expectations for students, different instititional calendars, and credits lost upon transfer all negatively affected student transitions to another college.

Castillo's (1984) study of transfer policy isolated similar problems that contributed to the diminishing transfer rate and were particularly detrimental to minority students: poor communication of transfer requirements to students; lack of information systems for counselors who advise transfer students; complex admissions and registration procedures; and lack of financial assistance.

Assessment and tracking systems are now widely accepted as successful methods for promoting transfer, retention, and graduation. Consistent with this, Astin (1977) earlier warned, "To

attract and enroll the largest possible number of qualified transfers...the recipient institution has (a stake) in smoothing the (transfer). It is difficult to overestimate the importance of adequate guidance, record keeping, and communications in helping students to make the transition smoothly."

Many researchers stressed the importance of internal measures Colleges should take to help transfer students. The Ford Foundation Report (1988) said that opportunities for students to become involved with the College should be increased for everything from organized peer groups to on-campus employment opportunities. Tinto (1987, p. 163) said, "Persistence entails the... integration of the individual as a competent member in the social and intellectual communities of the College...One obvious failure of institutions is to provide transfer students with their own orientation program-...offered more than one time a year."

Pascarella's (1986) results tended to confirm the importance of person-environment fit as a salient influence on persistence and degree completion. Consistent with this, Tinto (1987) found that "...the sense of being out of place in one's surrounding ...most often results in transfers to other institutions."

As the Ford Foundation Report (1988) summarized, "If all the recommendations were collapsed into one statement, it would read: identify the potential transfers early and monitor their progress through the college making frequent direct contact with them..." Or as Cohen, Brawer, and Bensimon (1985) advise, "Identify transfer students early and ensure a full complement of courses and services available to them."

METHODOLOGY

This information was derived from various sources, both internal and external. Applicant information was obtained from computerized files at the State University Application Processing Center. Persistence, graduation rates, and comparative enrollment information were taken from reports generated by the State University Office of Institutional Research and Policy Analysis. Information regarding enrollments of new transfer students from the regional perspective was obtained from a transfer study provided by a regional consortium on higher education. Finally, internal files and survey data were used to provide information on enrollments, attrition/retention rates, and student perceptions and attitudes towards the College. Despite discrepancies in definitions and collection methods between the diverse sources of information, it was possible to compile a comprehensive profile of transfer students at Suburban College.

TRANSFER APPLICANTS

Suburban College participates in a common Application Processing Center with the other state-operated institutions and some of the community colleges in the State. The application form provides applicants with the opportunity to choose a maximum of four participating colleges at one time. Among the applicants to Suburban College, the transfer applicants mostly applied only to Suburban College while first-time-to-college applicants were more likely to apply to more than one institution. Among transfer applicants who filed multiple applications, almost three-quarters made Suburban College their first choice. Information regarding

common applicants with the private institutions in the surrounding area was not obtainable.

Transfer applicants to Suburban College applied later in the application cycle than first-time-to-college applicants. Over three-quarters of the transfers applied after February. These late applications caused problems for the College in terms of planning and scheduling. However, the later applications were received, the greater were the percent yield of enrollments.

Over half the applicants transferred from regional, institutions within a 25 mile radius, mostly from the three nearest two-year institutions. Another quarter transferred from either the City University or other units of the State University system.

Over a third of the transfer students reported a GPA of 3.00 or greater. More than 90% reported GPAs greater than 2.00. Transfer students applied for admission mainly to four professional academic programs: Accounting, Business & Management, Computer Science and Teacher Education.

Three-quarters of the transfer applicants resided in the county of the College and the adjacent, eastern county. The nearby (20 miles) metropolis was the geographic area where most of the remaining applicants resided.

ENROLLED TRANSFERS

There were several distinct types of transfer students enrolled at Suburban College. Approximately half were traditional upper-division transfers from a two-year college; about a third were lower-division transfer students and about a fifth were non-matriculating students. The freshmen level transfers performed

academically more like first-time-to-college students than sophomore transfers who performed academically more like upper-division transfer students. Freshmen transfer students tended to have more problems academically and required more support services. Lower-division transfer students were more likely to be minority students than upper-division transfer students. Retention rates of lower-division transfers were better than those of first-time students but not as good as retention rates of upper-division transfer students.

Almost 60% of the transfer students were older, returning women. Over half of the new women transfer students were over the age of 25. About three-quarters of women transfer students over 25 years of age were baccalaureate degree students and entered as upper-division transfers. Almost a third of them were interested in the Teacher Education programs of the College. Overwhelmingly, they were Caucasian and resided in the local area.

The ratio of full-time to part-time transfer students has remained fairly stable over the past four years at 55:45 despite predictions of increased part-time enrollments. Full-time, upper-division enrollments have increased over the last three years from 50% to 64%. This seems to indicate that the College is becoming more attractive to the two-year college graduates.

TRANSFER POOL

An effort was made to increase our draw rates from the local institutions and to identify additional sources for transfer students. Since the area is experiencing a sharp decline in the high school population, enrollments and graduates at the junior colleges

are declining. This impacts Suburban College since half of the transfer students come from local two-year colleges. The community colleges of the City University are not experiencing as sharp a decline. However, Suburban College has not traditionally drawn many of its transfer students from this pool.

Data collected by the planning committee of a regional higher education consortium in 1987 detailed where a number of the transfers from the two-year colleges had enrolled. However, the data was confined only to full-time enrollments, and, therefore, is incomplete. Also, one of the larger private institutions did not participate in the study. Nevertheless, certain historical data were available from them that were able to be used as a model.

A similar report from the State University provided full-time enrollment information on transfers from the two-year colleges to the State University.

Two-Year College #1

This institution has conferred over 3,000 Associate degrees each year for the past five years. Approximately 1,000 full-time transfer students were reported in the regional transfer study and 500 in the State University report. In 1987, Suburban College enrolled about 10% of these transfers. A comparable study in 1983 indicated that Suburban College had enrolled 6% of the full-time transfers in that year. Thus, Suburban College has increased not only its share of full-time transfers, it has also increased the number of full-time transfer students it enrolled from this institution by 49% over the four-year period.

Two-Year College #2

This institution is the smallest of the three two-year institutions. It has experienced the largest decline of the three institutions in graduates over four years (from 1900 to 1500 graduates). Over 450 full-time transfers were identified in the regional report and an equal number by the State University. Suburban College enrolled the largest proportion of the enrolled transfers with 10% of the total. In the 1983 study, Suburban College only received 5% of the full-time transfers. By 1987, Suburban College not only doubled its share of the total transfer pool from this institution, but had a 110% increase in the number of full-time transfers it enrolled from this two-year college over the four year period.

Two-Year College #3

This institution has graduated over 2,000 students each year for the past four years. It has experienced some decline in enrollment, but the population of the county in which it is located is younger than that in the county where two-year college #1 is located and, therefore, the decline is not expected to be felt for some time yet. Almost 600 full-time transfers from this institution were identified in the regional study and an additional 350 by the State University. Suburban College enrolled about 7% of the total. In the 1983 study Suburban College enrolled almost the same proportion of the full-time transfers from College #3. Both the share of transfers and the number of transfers to Suburban College from this institution have remained relatively stable over the four-year period. This institution is the furthest away from

Suburban College and the more difficult to commute from.

Upstate Public Institutions

About 15,000 students from the two counties attend the State University four-year institutions upstate. In 1987 over 400 of them transferred back to institutions in the two counties as full-time students. Nine percent transferred to Suburban College.

City University Two-Year Institutions

Only 145 full-time transfers from the City University two-year institutions were reported in 1987 despite the fact that several institutions are within easy commuting distance of the metropolis. Suburban College received the largest portion of these full-time transfers with 22%. Over 28% transferred to two-year institutions. Almost 90% transferred to an institution within the county in which Suburban College is located. Half transferred to public institutions including Suburban College.

PERSISTENCE AND GRADUATION RATES

A cohort study of full-time entering transfer students by division has been in progress since fall 1976. These cohorts are tracked each year for five years to determine attrition, retention and graduation rates. At the end of the fifth year the cohort is further broken down by racial/ethnic category. Beginning in 1985 at Suburban College, lower-division, full-time transfer students have been divided into freshman and sophomore levels to examine their persistence rates.

Upper-Division Transfers

This group of transfer students is the most successful. About 40% of these students graduate within two-years of entering the

College. After three years, over half have graduated. Over five years, two-thirds graduate. Racial/ethnic category does not appear to affect the persistence rates of these students.

Lower-Division Transfers

Lower-division transfer students are less successful than upper-division transfer students. After four years, about 35% have graduated. After five years, about 40% graduate while about 3% are still enrolled.

Sophomore transfer students (32 to 56 transfer credits) appear to be the more successful of the lower-division transfers. While there were only three years of data, 40% of this group had graduated and 17% were still enrolled. Freshman transfers (1 to 31 transfer credits), on the other hand, graduated 17% and had 26% still enrolled during the same time period. Over one year, attrition rates for the two groups were the same. However, over two years, 45% of the sophomores had dropped out while 55% of the freshmen had done the same.

Persistence rates for lower-division transfer students did not appear to be affected by racial/ethnic category regardless of entering level.

Comparative Persistence Rates

A report from the State University Office of Institutional Research provided comparative information of persistence rates over one year of transfers from two-year to four-year institutions of the State University. This report was done for the past three years which provided trends. Persistence rates of the transfers from the three local two-year colleges to Suburban College and the

other State University Colleges were examined. In all cases, the persistence rates of full-time transfers to Suburban College have remained stable at about 70% over one year. These rates were close to the overall persistence rates of all full-time transfers from these institutions.

STUDENT OPINION SURVEY

In the spring 1988, the College administered the ACT Student Opinion survey to a representative sample of its students. The responses were broken down for transfers and first-time-to-college students to determine whether there were any differences in the students' satisfaction with the college environment and services. An additional 30 questions of special interest to the College and the State University were developed and administered with the survey.

Background Information

Over one-quarter of the transfer respondents indicated that they had transferred from another four-year college. Over two-thirds of them were not married. Over three-quarters were attending classes full-time. Half of the total worked more than 20 hours a week. Less than 30% of the transfer respondents were receiving financial aid while twice as many first-time respondents were. Three-quarters were maintaining a GPA of 2.50 or better.

College Services

Overall, the transfer respondents used the College's services less than the first-time respondents. This can be attributed to the fact that only 10% of the transfers lived on campus while 40% of the first-time respondents resided in the dormitories. One

service which transfers used much less (39% vs. 64%), and were less satisfied with, was Computer Services. In general, however, the transfer respondents gave higher satisfaction ratings to the services they used than the first-time respondents did.

College Environment

Respondents were asked to rate forty-two statements regarding their satisfaction with the College in the areas of Academics, Admissions, Rules & Regulations, Facilities, Registration, and in General. Respondents who indicated they had entered as transfer students gave higher ratings than those who entered as first-time students in most areas of the College environment. Classroom and laboratory facilities as well as study areas were rated lower by the transfer respondents than the first-time respondents. They were also less satisfied with the availability of courses at times they could take them. They were less satisfied with the Student Union, the student newspaper and the opportunities available to them for personal involvement on campus. Lower satisfaction with these three items was also evident in the responses of commuter students (many of whom were transfers) and would indicate that they did not feel adequately involved in student governance on campus.

Campus Questions

Several questions were developed in order to determine what factors made students decide to enroll at Suburban College. Since the cost of attending a public institution is much less than attending a private one, respondents were asked how important cost was to them. Only 13% of the transfers indicated that cost was not a factor. Over half indicated that it was the primary reason they

chose Suburban College and 30% indicated it had influenced their decision. This was interesting since almost half indicated an annual family income over $40,000 and two-thirds had indicated that they were single. Other factors which were important to transfer students in choosing Suburban College were the location (37%) and the program of study (24%). Only 3% indicated the academic reputation and 26% indicated a combination of factors. The transfer respondents also indicated that the liberal transfer policy of the College was an important influence (23%) as well as the fact that most courses are offered for four credits (10%). A related question regarding satisfaction with their experiences transferring credits from another institution indicated that three-quarters of the transfer students were satisfied with the transfer arrangement and the number of credits transferred. Over 80% indicated that they expected to graduate from Suburban College. One item of particular interest was the fact that 60% of the transfer respondents indicated that neither of their parents had a college degree. This is unusual because 79% of them resided in an area whose population is one of the most highly educated in the State.

NON-RETURNING STUDENT SURVEY

In the Fall 1988 semester, a survey was sent to 700 students who were enrolled in the Spring but did not return in the Fall. This survey was to help determine the reasons why students do not return to school. Two hundred and seventy-two valid responses were returned for a response rate of 39%. Two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they had been transfer students to Old Westbury College at their first semester. Sixty percent of the

transfer respondents indicated that they were attending classes part-time as compared with 33% of the total student body.

When transfer students were asked what their plans were for the coming year, 66% indicated that they planned to work, either full or part time; 53% indicated that they planned to enroll in college. Twice as many transfer as first-time students indicated that they planned to re-enroll at Suburban College. Eighty-six percent indicated that they were in good academic standing when they had left.

The survey listed 38 reasons why a student might leave a college. Respondents were asked to indicate whether each was a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason for their withdrawal from the College.

Among the reasons which transfer respondents indicated as a major reason for leaving were: conflict between job and college (28%); family responsibilities too great (22%); accepted a full-time job (21%); had unexpected expenses (20%); and decided to attend a different college (21%).

These were very different from the major reasons given by first-time respondents: decided to attend a different college (48%); suspended or on probation (20%); dissatisfied with the social life (27%); major not offered (23%); disappointed with the quality of instruction (20%); impersonal attitudes of faculty and staff (19%); and dissatisfied with Old Westbury's academic reputation (18%).

Based on the reasons given by transfer respondents, it appears that they encounter more personal difficulties trying to work and

attend school while maintaining a family, as compared with dissatisfaction with the College's academic standards or student services. They tend to be stop-outs rather than dropouts.

OUT-GOING TRANSFERS

Since about half the respondents to the non-returning student survey indicated that they did not intend to re-enroll and one-third indicated that they planned to enroll in a different college, an effort was made to determine where they might go. Data from three different sources were available regarding transfers from Suburban College to another institution. Two of the sources were from the State University and the third was from the regional higher education consortium.

Application Processing Center

At the end of the application cycle, the participating institutions send an updated data file to the Application Center indicating whether or not the applicant had been accepted and/or enrolled. According to the data received from this source, 125 transfer applications had been received from Suburban College students. From this group, 53% were accepted for admission and 33% subsequently enrolled at another State University institution. Over one-third of them enrolled at one of the local public institutions.

State University Office of Institutional Research

Information received from the State Office of Institutional Research provided academic program areas into which the transfers enrolled. The information for Suburban College transfers indicated that almost 60% of them had not declared a majors.

Regional Higher Education Consortium

The regional higher education consortium study identified 30 full-time transfers from Suburban College. There was no particular institution into which they transferred.

From the data available, only one-quarter of the non-returning students were identified as having transferred to another regional or State University institution.

RESULTS OR CONCLUSIONS

Both persistence and graduation rates of full-time transfer students within the College were more than double the persistence rates of first-time, entering students. One-year persistence rates of students who transferred to Suburban College were comparable to the persistence rates at other units of the State University. Distinct differences were noted between transfer students and other students in both demographic characteristics and satisfaction indices. Transfer students were more likely to stop-out than drop-out. The reasons they left were more likely to be financial or job-related than dissatisfaction with the institution. They were generally more satisfied with the College than first-time students. Students transferring to other units of the State University tended to prefer university centers to liberal arts colleges.

Over the past three years, Suburban College has substantially increased its percent of the public higher education share of transfer students from the three, two-year institutions institutions in the primary market area. However, data indicated that Suburban College was not as attractive to full-time transfer students as the private institutions were.

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